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Nevaeh

Book: 24

This Kiss

Hanna; one foot on a bench; is lacing up her shoes when I come in. My awful secret is that I like to run with Hanna partly because it is the single; sole; a solitary shred of a thing that I can do better than she can; but I would never admit that aloud in a million years.

I have not even had a chance to put my bag down before she is leaning forward and grabbing my arm.

'Can you believe it?' She is fighting a smile, and her eyes are a pinwheel of color-blue; green; gold-flashing like they always do when she is excited about something. 'It was the

Invalids. That is what everybody is saying,
anyway.'

We are the only people in the locker
room-all the sports teams have finished their
seasons-but I instinctively whip my head
around when she says the word.

'Keep your voice down.'

She pulls back a little, tossing her
hair over one shoulder. 'Relax. I did recon. Even
checked the toilet stalls. We're in the clear.'

I open the gym locker I have had for
all my ten years at St. Anne's. At its bottom is

a film of gum wrappers and shredded notes and lost paper clips, and on top of that; my small limp pile of running clothes; two pairs of shoes; my cross-country team jersey; a dozen half-used bottles of deodorant; conditioner, and perfume. In less than two weeks I will graduate and never see the inside of this locker again, and for a second, I get sad.

It is gross; but I have always loved the smell of gyms- the industrial cleaning fluid and the deodorant and soccer balls and even the lingering smell of sweat.

It is comforting to me. It is so strange how life works- You want something, and you wait and wait and feel like it is taking forever to come. Then it happens and it is over and all you want to do is curl back up at that moment before things changed.

'Who's everybody; anyway? The news is saying it was just a mistake; a shipping error or something.' I feel the need to repeat the official story; even though I know just as well as Hanna that it is BS.

She straddles the bench, watching me.

As usual; she is oblivious to the fact that I hate it when other people see me change. 'Don't be an idiot. If it was on the news; it is not true. Besides, who mixes up a cow and a box of prescription meds? It's not like it's hard to tell the difference.'

I shrug. She is right; obviously. She is still looking at me; so- I angle slightly away. I have never been comfortable with my body like Hanna and some of the other girls at St. Anne's; never gotten over the awkward feeling that I have been fitted together just a little wrong in some very key places. Like I have been

sketched by an amateur artist- If you do not look too closely; it is all right but start focusing and all the smudges and mistakes become obvious. Hanna kicks one leg out and begins stretching; refusing to let the issue drop.

Hanna's more fascinated with the wilds than anyone I have ever met. 'If you think about it; it's pretty amazing. The planning and all that. It would have taken at least four or five people-maybe more-to coordinate everything.' I think briefly of the boy I saw on the observation deck; of his flashing; autumn-leaf-colored hair, and the way

he tipped his head back when he laughed so I could see the vaulted black arch of his mouth. I told no one about him; not even Hanna, and now I feel I should have.

Hanna goes on; 'Someone must have had security codes. Maybe a sympathizer.'

A door bangs loudly at the front of the locker room, and Hanna and I both jump; staring at each other with wide eyes.

Footsteps click quickly across the linoleum. After a few seconds of hesitation; Hanna launches smoothly into a safe topic- the color of the graduation gowns; which are orange this year.

Just then Mrs. Jonson; the athletic director;
comes around the bank of lockers; swinging her
whistle around one finger.

‘At least they are not brown; like at
Fieldston Prep;’ I say, though I am barely
listening to Hanna. My heart is pounding, and I
am still thinking about the boy and wondering
whether Jonson heard us say the word
sympathizer. She does not do anything but nod
as she passes us; so, it seems unlikely.

I have learned to get good at this -
say one thing when I am thinking about
something else; act like I am listening when I

am not; pretend to be calm and happy when really; I am freaking out. It is one of the skills you perfect as you get older. You must learn that people are always listening.

The first time I ever used the cell phone that my aunt and uncle share; I was surprised by the patchy interference that kept breaking up my conversation with Hanna at random intervals; until my aunt explained that it was just the government's listening devices; which arbitrarily cut into cell phone calls; recording them; monitoring conversations for

target words like love; or Invalids; or sympathizer.

No one; in particular; is targeted; it is all done randomly; to be fair. But it is almost worse that way. I always feel as though a giant; revolving gaze is bound to sweep over me at any second; lighting up my bad thoughts like an animal lit still and white in the ever-turning beam of a lighthouse. Sometimes as though there are two I make, indeed, one coasting directly on top of the other- the superficial me; who nods when she is supposed to nod and says what she is supposed to say, and some other;

deeper part; the part that worries, dreams,
and says 'Gray.'

Most of the time they move along
coordinated, and I hardly notice the split, but
sometimes it feels as though I am two
different people, and I could rip apart at any
second. Once I confessed this to Rachel. She
just smiled and told me it would all be better
after the procedure. After the procedure, she
said, it would be all coasting; all glides; every day
as easy as one; two; three.

'Ready;' I say, spinning my locker
closed. We can still hear Mrs. Jonson shuffling

around in the bathroom, whistling. A toilet flushes. A faucet goes on.

‘My turn to pick the route,’ Hanna says, eyes sparkling, and before I can open my mouth to protest; she lunges forward and smacks me on the shoulder.’

‘Tag- you’re it;’ she says, and just as easily spins off the bench and sprints for the door; laughing; so- I must run to catch up.

Earlier in the day, it rained, and the storm cooled everything off. Water evaporates from puddles in the streets, leaving a

shimmering layer of mist over Pittsburgh.

Above us; the sky is now a vivid blue. The bay is flat and silver; the coast like a giant belt cinched around it; keeping it in place.

I do not ask Hanna where she is going, but it does not surprise me when she starts winding us toward Old Port; toward the old footpath that runs along Commercial Street and up to the labs.

We try to keep on the smaller; less-trafficked streets, but it is a losing game. It is three-thirty. All the schools have been released, and the streets surge with students walking

home. A few buses rumble past, and one or two cars squeeze by. Cars are considered good luck. As they pass; people reach out their hands and brush along with the shiny hoods; the clean; bright windows; which will soon be smudged with fingerprints. Hanna and I run next to each other; reviewing all the day's gossip. We do not talk about the botched evaluations yesterday, or the rumors of the Invalids.

There are too many people around. Instead, she tells me about her ethics exam, and I tell her about Cora Dervish's fight with Minna Wilkinson. We talk about Willow Marks; too;

who has been absent from school since the previous Wednesday. Rumor is that Willow was found by regulators last week in Deering Oaks Park after curfew -with a boy.

We have been hearing rumors like that about Willow for years. She is just the kind of person people talk about. She has blond hair, but she is always coloring different streaks into it with markers, and I remember once on a first-year class trip to a museum; we passed a group of Spencer Prep boys and she said; so loud one of our chaperones could have easily heard; 'I'd like to kiss one of them straight on the

lips.' She was caught hanging out with a boy in tenth grade and got off with a warning because she showed no signs of deliria.

Every so often people makes mistakes; it is biological; a result of the same chemical and hormonal imbalances that occasionally lead to Un-naturalism; to boys being attracted to children to girls. These impulses; too; will be resolved by the cure. But this time it is serious, and Hanna drops the bomb just as we turn onto Center- Mr. and Mrs. Marks have agreed to move the date of Willow's procedure up by a full

six months. She will be missing graduation day to get cured.

‘Six months?’ I repeat. We have been running hard for twenty minutes; so- I am not sure if the heavy thumping in my chest is a result of the exercise or the news. I am feeling more out of breath than I should be like someone is sitting on my chest. ‘Isn’t that dangerous?’ Hanna tips her head to the right; gesturing the way to a shortcut through an alley. ‘It’s been done before.’

‘Yeah; but not successfully. What about all the side effects? Mental problems?’

Blindness?' There are a few reasons why the scientists will not let anyone under the age of eighteen have the procedure, but the biggest one is that it just does not seem to work as well for people younger than that, and in the worst cases it has been known to cause all crazy difficulties. Scientists speculate that the brain and its neuropathways are still too plastic before then; still in the middle of forming themselves. The older you are when you have the procedure; the better; but most people are scheduled for the procedure as close as possible to their eighteenth birthday.

'They think it's worth the risk;'

Hanna says. 'Better than the alternative; you know? Amor deliria Nervosa. The deadliest of all deadly things.' This is the catchphrase that is written on every mental health pamphlet ever written about deliria; Hanna's voice is flat as she repeats it, and it makes my stomach dip. All of yesterday's craziness has made me forget Hanna's comment to me before the evaluations. But now I remember and remember how strange she looked too, eyes cloudy and unreadable.

'Come on.' I feel a straining in my lungs and my left thigh is starting to cramp. The only way to push through it is to run harder and faster. 'Let us pick it up; Slug.'

'Bring it.' Hanna's face splits into a grin, and both of us start pumping faster. The pain in my lungs swells up and blossoms until it feels like it is everywhere, tearing through all my cells and muscles at once. The cramp in my leg makes me wince every time my heel hits the pavement. It is always like this on miles two and three; like all the stress, anxiety, irritation, and fear get transformed into little needling

points of physical pain, and you cannot breathe or imagine going farther or think anything, but I cannot. I cannot. I cannot.

And then; just as suddenly; it is gone.

All the pain lifts away; the cramp vanishes; the first ease off my chest, and I can breathe easily. Instantly a feeling of total happiness bubbles up inside of me- the solid feeling of the ground underneath me; the simplicity of the movement; rocketing off my heels; pushing forward in time and space; total freedom and release. I glance over at Hanna. I can tell from her expression that she is feeling it too. She

has made it through the wall. She senses me looking and whips around; her blond ponytail a bright arc; to give me the thumbs-up.

It is strange. When we run; I feel closer to Hanna than at any other time. Even when we are not talking; it is like there is an invisible cord tethering us together; matching our rhythms; our arms and our legs as though we are both responding to the same drumbeat.

For my sister, Karly- Han's girl is forever I like to save things. Not important things like whales or people or the environment. Silly things. Porcelain bells: the kind you get at

souvenir shops. Cookie cutters you will never use
because who needs a cookie in the shape of
a foot? Ribbons for my hair.

Love letters. Of all the things I save;
I guess you could say my love letters are my
most prized possession. I keep my letters in a
teal hatbox my mom bought me from a vintage
store downtown.

They do not love letters that
someone else wrote for me; I do not have any of
those. These are the ones I have written.
There is one for every boy I've ever loved- five
in all.

When I write, I hold nothing back. I write as he will never read it. Because he never will.

Every secret thought; every careful observation; everything I have saved up inside me; I put it all in the letter. When I am done; I seal it; I address it, and then I put it in my teal hatbox.

They do not love letters in the strictest sense of the word. My letters are for when I do not want to be in love anymore. They are for goodbye. Because after I write my letter; I am no longer consumed by my all-

consuming love. I can eat my cereal and not wonder if he likes bananas over his Cheerios too; I can sing along to love songs and not be singing them to him. If love is like a possession; my letters are like my exorcisms. My letters set me free. Or at least they are supposed to.

JOSH IS MARGOT'S BOYFRIEND;

BU IT guess you could say my whole family is a little in love with him. It is hard to say who most of all. Before he was Margot's boyfriend; he was just Josh. He was always there. I say always, but that is not true. He moved next door five years ago, but it feels like always.

My dad loves Josh because he is a boy, and my dad is surrounded by girls. I mean it- all day long he is surrounded by females. My dad is an ob-gyn, and he also happens to be the father of three daughters; so, it is like girls; girls; girls all day. He also likes Josh because Josh likes comics and he will go fishing with him. My dad tried to take us fishing once, and I cried when my shoes got mud on them, and Margot cried when her book got wet, and Kellie cried because Kellie was still a baby.

Kellie loves Josh because he will play cards with her and not get bored. Or at least

pretend to not get bored. They make deals with each other- if I win this next hand; you must make me a toasted crunchy-peanut-butter-sandwich; no crusts.

That is Kellie...

Inevitably there will not be crunchy peanut butter and Josh will say too bad; pick something else. But then Kellie will wear him down and he will run out and buy some because that's Josh.

If I had to say why Margot loves him; I think I would say it is because we all do.

We are in the living room; Kellie is
posting pictures of dogs to a giant piece of
cardboard. There are paper and scraps all
around her. Humming to herself; she says,
'When Daddy asks me what I want for
Christmas; I am just going to say; 'Pick any one
of these breeds and we'll be good.' 'Margot and
Josh are on the couch; I'm lying on the floor;
watching TV. Josh popped a big bowl of popcorn,
and I devote myself to it; handfuls and
handfuls of it.

A commercial comes on for perfume- a
girl is running around the streets of- Paris in an

orchid-colored halter dress that is thin as
tissue paper. What I would not give to be that;
the girl in that tissue-paper dress running
around Paris in springtime! I sit up so-o
suddenly; I choke on a kernel of popcorn.
Between coughs I say, 'Margot; let us meet in
Paris for my spring break!' I am already
picturing myself twirling with a pistachio
macaron in one hand and a raspberry one in the
other.

Margot's eyes light up. 'Do you think
Daddy will let you?'

'Sure; it's culture. He'll have to let me.' But, indeed, I have never flown by myself before. And I have never even left the country before. Would Margot meet me at the airport; or would I have to find my way to the hostel?

Josh must see the sudden worry on my face because he says, 'Don't worry.

Your dad will let you go if I'm with you.'

I brighten. 'Yeah! We can stay at hostels and just eat pastries and cheese for all our meals.'

'We can go to Jim Morrison's grave!'

Josh throws in.

'We can go to a perfumeries' and get our scents done!' I cheer, and Josh snorts.

'Um; I'm quite sure 'getting our scents done,' at some perfumeries' would cost the same as a week's stay at the hostel;' he says. He nudges Margot. 'Your sister suffers from delusions of grandeur.'

'She is the fanciest of the three of us;' Margot agrees.

'What about me?' Kellie whimpers.

'You?' I scoff. 'You're the least fancy Song girl. I have to beg you to wash your feet at night; much less take a shower.'

Kellie's face gets pinched and red. 'I wasn't talking about that; you dodo bird. I was talking about Paris.'

Airily, I wave her off. 'You're too little to stay at a hostel.'

She crawls over to Margot and climbs in her lap; even though she is nine and nine is too big to sit in people's laps. 'Margot; you'll let me go; won't you?'

‘Maybe it could be a family vacation;’
Margot says, kissing her cheek. ‘You and Lara
Jean and Daddy could all come.’

I frown... That is not at all the Paris
trip I was imagining. Over Kellie’s head Josh
mouths to me, we will talk later, and I give him
a discreet thumbs-up.

It is later that night; Josh is long
gone. Kellie and our dad are asleep. We are in the
kitchen. Margot is at the table on her
computer; I am sitting next to her; rolling
cookie dough into balls and dropping them in
cinnamon and sugar. Snickerdoodles to get back

in Kellie's good graces. Earlier, when I went in to say good night; Kellie rolled over and would not speak to me because she is still convinced; I am going to try to cut her out of the Paris trip.

I plan to put the snickerdoodles on a plate right next to her pillow, so she wakes up to the smell of fresh-baked cookies.

Margot's being extra quiet, and then; out of nowhere; she looks up from her computer and says, 'I broke up with Josh tonight. After dinner.'

My cookie-dough ball falls out of my fingers and into the sugar bowl.

'I mean; it was time;' she says. Her eyes are not red-rimmed; she has not been crying; I do not think. Her voice is calm and even. Anyone looking at her would think she was fine.

Because Margot is always fine; even when she is not.

'I don't see why you had to break up;' I say. 'Just cause you're going to college doesn't mean you have to break up.'

'Lara Jean; I'm going to Scotland; not UVA. Saint Andrews is nearly four thousand miles away.' She pushes up her glasses. 'What would be the point?'

I cannot even believe she would say that. 'The point is it's Josh. Josh who loves you more than any boy has ever loved a girl!'

Margot rolls her eyes at this. She thinks I am being dramatic, but I am not. It is true; that is how much Josh loves Margot. He would never so much as look at another girl.

Suddenly she says, 'Do you know what Mommy told me once?'

'What?' For a moment, I forget all about Josh. Because no matter what I am doing in life; if Margot and I are in the middle of an argument; if I am about to get hit by a car; I will always stop and listen to a story about Mommy.

Any detail; any remembrance that; Margot has; I want to have it too. I am better off than Kellie; though. Kellie does not have one memory of Mommy that we have not given her. We have told her so many stories so

many times that they are hers now. 'Remember that time-;' she will say. And then she will tell the story like she was there and not just a baby.

'She told me to try not to go to college with a boyfriend. She said she didn't want me to be the girl crying on the phone with her boyfriend and saying no to things instead of yes.'

Scotland is Margot's; yes; I guess. Absently, I scoop up a mound of cookie dough and pop it in my mouth.

'You shouldn't eat raw cookie dough;'
Margot says.

I ignore her. 'Josh would never hold
you back from anything. He is not like that.

Remember how when you decided to
run for student-body president; he was your
campaign manager? He's your biggest fan!'

At this, the corners of Margot's
mouth turn down, and I get up and fling my
arms around her neck. She leans her head back
and smiles up at me. 'I'm okay;' she says, but
she is not I know she is not.

'It's not too late; you know. You can go over there right now and tell him you changed your mind.'

Margot shakes her head. 'It's done; Lara Jean.' I release her and she closes her laptop. 'When will the first batch be ready? I'm hungry.'

I look at the magnetic egg timer on the fridge. 'Four more minutes.' I sit back down and say, 'I don't care what you say, Margot. You guys are not done. You love him too much.'

She shakes her head. 'Lara Jean;' she begins; in her patient Margot's voice; like I am a child, and she is a wise old woman of forty-two.

I wave a spoonful of cookie dough under Margot's nose, and she hesitates and then opens her mouth. I feed it to her like a baby. 'Wait and see; you and Josh will be back together in a day; maybe two.' But even as I am saying it; I know it is not true. Margot's not the kind of girl to break up and get back together on a whim; once she is decided something; that is, it. There is no waffling, no

regrets. It is like she said- when she has done;
she has just done.

I wish (and this is a thought I have
had many; many times; too many times to count)
I was more like Margot. Because sometimes it
feels like I will never be done.

Later, after I have washed the
dishes, plated the cookies, and set them on
Kellie's pillow; I go to my room. I do not turn
the light on. I go to my window. Josh's light is
still on.

THE NEXT MORNING: MARGOT

making coffee and I am pouring cereal into bowls, and I say the thing I have been thinking all morning. 'Just so you know; Daddy and Kellie are going to be upset.' When Kellie and I were brushing our teeth just now; I was tempted to go ahead and disclose information, but Kellie was still mad at me from yesterday; so- I kept quiet. She did not even acknowledge my cookies; though I know she ate them because all that was left on the plate were crumbs.

Margot lets out a heavy sigh. 'So;
I'm supposed to stay with Josh because of you
and Daddy and Kellie?'

'No; I'm just telling you.'

'It's not like he would come over here
that much once I was gone; anyway.'

I frown... This did not occur to me;
that Josh would stop coming over because
Margot was gone. He was coming over long
before they were ever a couple; so- I do not see
why he should stop. 'He might;' I say. 'He loves
Kellie.'

She pushes the start button on the coffee machine. I am watching her super carefully because; Margot's always been the one to make the coffee and I never have, and now; that she is leaving (only six more days); I would better knowledgeable. With her back to me, she says, 'Maybe I won't even mention it to them.'

'Um; I think they'll figure it out when he's not at the airport; Gogo.' Gogo is my nickname for Margot. As in go-go boots. 'How many cups of water did you put in there?

And how many spoons of coffee beans?'

'I'll write it all down for you,' Margot assures me. 'In the notebook.'

We keep a house notebook by the fridge. Margot's idea; of course. It has all the important numbers and Daddy's schedule and Kellie's Caceool. 'Make sure you put in the number for the new dry cleaners,' I say.

'Already done.' Margot slices a banana for her cereal- each slice is perfectly thin. 'And also; Josh wouldn't have come to the airport with us anyway. You know how I feel; about sad good-byes.' Margot makes a face; like Ugh; emotions.

I do know.

When Margot decided to go to college in Scotland; it felt like a betrayal.

Even though I knew it was coming because of course; she was going to go to college somewhere far away. And of course; she was going to go to college in Scotland and study anthropology; because she is Margot; the girl with the maps and the travel books and the plans. Of course, she would leave us one day.

I am still mad at her; just a little. Just a teeny-tiny bit. I know it is not her fault.

But she is going so far away, and we always said we would be the Song girls forever.

Margot first; I in the middle and my sister Kellie last. On her birth certificate, she is Katherine; to us she is Kellie. Occasionally we call her Kitten because that is what I called her when she was born- she looked like a scrawny, hairless kitten.

We are the three Song girls. There used to be four. My mom; Eve Song. Evie to my dad; Mommy to us; Eve to everyone else. The song was my mom's last name. Our last name is Covey- Covey like a lovey, not like a cove. But

the reason we are the Song girls and not the Covey girls is my mom used to say that she was a Song girl for life, and Margot said then we should be too. We all have Song for our middle name, and we look more Song than Covey anyway; more Korean than white. At least Margot and I do; Kellie looks most like Daddy-her hair is light brown like this. People say I look the most like Mommy, but Margot does, with her high cheekbones and dark eyes. It has been six years now, and sometimes it feels like just yesterday she was here, and sometimes it feels like she never was only in dreams.

She had mopped the floors that morning; they were shiny, and everything smelled like lemons and clean house. The phone was ringing in the kitchen; she came running in to answer it, and she slipped. She hit her head on the floor, and she was unconscious; but then she woke up and she was fine. That was her lucid interval. That is what they call it. A little while later she said she had a headache; she went to lie down on the couch, and then she did not wake up.

Margot was the one who found her. She was twelve. She took care of everything-

she called 911; she called Daddy; she told me to watch over Kellie; who was only three. I turned on the TV for Kellie in the playroom and I sat with her. That is all I did. I do not know what I would have done if Margot had not been there. Even though Margot is only two years older than me; I look up to her more than anybody.

When other adults find out that my dad is a single parent of three girls; they shake their heads in admiration; like How does he do it? How does he ever manage that all by himself? The answer is Margot. She has been an

organizer from the start; everything is labeled and scheduled and arranged in neat, even rows. Margot is a good girl, and I guess Kellie and I have followed her lead. I have never cheated or gotten drunk or smoked a cigarette or even had a boyfriend.

We tease Daddy and say how lucky he is that we are all so good, but the truth is; we are the lucky ones. He is a good dad. And he tries hard. He does not always understand us, but he tries, and that is the important thing. We three Song girls have an unspoken pact- to make life as easy as possible for Daddy. But

then again; it is not so unspoken; because how many times have; I heard Margot say, 'Shh; be quiet; Daddy's taking a nap before he has to go back to the hospital;' or 'Don't bother Daddy with that; do it yourself?'

I have asked Margot what she thinks it would have been like if Mommy had not died. Like would we spend more time with our Korean side of the family and not just on- Thanksgiving and New Year's Day? Or- Margot does not see the point in wondering. This is our life; there is no use in asking what if. No one could ever give you the answers. I try; I do,

but it is hard for me to accept this way of thinking. I am always wondering about the what-ifs; about the road not taken.

Daddy and Kellie come downstairs at the same time. Margot pours Daddy a cup of coffee; black, and I pour milk into Kellie's cereal bowl. I push it in front of her, and she turns her head away from me and gets a yogurt out of the fridge. She takes it into the living room to eat in front of the TV. So, she is still mad.

'I'm going to go to Costco later today; so- you girls make a list of whatever you need;'

Daddy asks, taking a big sip of coffee.

'I think I'll pick up some New York strips for dinner.

We can grill out. Should I get one for Josh; too?'

My head whips in Margot's direction. She opens her mouth and closes it.

Then she says, 'No; just get enough for the four of us; Daddy.'

I give her a reproving look, and she ignores me. I have never known Margot to chicken out before, but I suppose in matters of

the heart; there is no predicting how a person will or will not behave.

SO NOW IT'S THE LAST Days of summer and our last days with Margot.

It is not altogether such a dreadful thing that she broke up with Josh; this way we have more time with just us sisters. I am sure she must have thought of that. I am sure it was part of the plan.

We are driving out of our neighborhood when we see Josh run past. He joined track last year; so now he is always

running. Kellie yells his name, but the windows are up, and it is no use anyway- he pretends not to hear. 'Turn around;' Kellie urges Margot.

'Maybe he wants to come with us.'

'This is a Song-girls-only day;' I tell her.

We spend the rest of the morning at Target; picking up last-minute things like Honey Nut Chex mix for the flight and deodorant and hair ties. We let Kellie push the cart so she can do that thing where she gets a running start and then rides the cart like; she is pushing a

chariot. Margot only lets her do it a couple of times before she makes her stop; though; so as not to annoy other customers.

Next; we go back home and make chicken salad with green grapes for lunch and then it is time for Kellie's swim meet. We pack a picnic dinner of ham-and-cheese sandwiches and fruit salad and bring Margot's laptop to watch movies on because swim meets can go long into the night. We make a sign; too; that says Go Kellie Go!

I draw a dog on it. Daddy ends up missing the swim meet because he is delivering

a baby, and as far as excuses go; it is a surprisingly good one. (It was a girl, and they named her Patricia Rose after her two grandmothers. Daddy always finds out the first and middle name for me. It is the first thing I ask when he gets home from delivery.)

Kellie's so excited about winning two first-place ribbons and one-second place that she forgets to ask where Josh is until we are in the car driving back home. She is in the backseat, and she has her towel wrapped around her head like a turban and her ribbons dangling from her ears like earrings. She leans

forward and says, 'Hey! Why didn't Josh come to my meet?'

I can see Margot hesitate; so- I answer before she can. The only thing I am better at than Margot is lying. 'He had to work at the bookstore tonight. He wanted to make it; though.' Margot reaches across the console and gives my hand a grateful squeeze.

Sticking out her lower lip; Kellie says, 'That was the last regular meet! He promised he'd come to watch me swim.'

'It was a last-minute thing,' I say.
'He couldn't get out of working the shift
because one of his coworkers had an emergency.'

Kellie nods begrudgingly. Little as she
is; she understands emergency shifts.

'Let us get frozen custards,' Margot
says suddenly.

Kellie lights up, and Josh and his
imaginary emergency shift are forgotten.

'Yeah! I want a waffle cone! Can I
get a waffle cone with two scoops? I want a

mint chip, and peanut brittle. No; rainbow sherbet and double fudge. No; wait...'

I twist around in my seat. 'You can't finish two scoops and a waffle cone;' I tell her.

'Maybe you could finish two scoops in a cup; but not in a cone.'

'Yes; I can... Tonight I can. I'm starving.'

'Fine; but you better finish the whole thing.' I shake my finger at her and say it like a threat, which makes her roll her eyes and giggle. As for me, I will get what I always get;

the cherry chocolate-chunk custard in a sugar cone.

Margot pulls into the drive-thru, and as we wait our turn; I say; 'I bet they don't have frozen custard in Scotland.'

'Probably not;' she says.

'You won't have another one of these until Thanksgiving;' I say.

Margot looks straight ahead.

'Christmas;' she says, correcting me.

'Thanksgiving's too short to fly all that way; remember?'

'Thanksgiving's going to suck.' Kellie pouts.

I am silent. We have never had a Thanksgiving without Margot. She always does the turkey and the broccoli casserole and the creamed onions. I do the pies (pumpkin and pecan) and the mashed potatoes. Kellie is the taste tester and the table-setter. I do not know how to roast a turkey. And both of our grandmothers will be there, and Nana; Daddy's mother; likes Margot best of all of us. She says Kellie drains her and I am too dreamy-eyed.

Suddenly, I feel panicky, and it is hard to breathe, and I could not care less about cherry chocolate-chunk custard. I cannot picture Thanksgiving without Margot. I cannot even picture next Monday without her.

I know most sisters do not get along, but I am closer to Margot than I am to anybody in the world. How can we be the Song girls without Margot?

MY OLDEST FRIEND CHRIS

SMOKE- She hooks up with boys she does know hardly at all, and she has been suspended twice. One time she had to go to court for truancy.

I never knew what truancy was before I met Chris. FYI: it is when you skip so much school; you are in trouble with the law.

I am quite sure that if Chris and I met each other now; we would not be friends. We are as different can be. But it was not always this way. In sixth grade, Chris liked stationery and sleepovers and staying up all night watching John Hughes movies; just like me. But by eighth grade; she was sneaking out after my dad fell asleep to meet boys she met at the mall. They would drop her back off before it got light outside. I would stay up

until she came back; terrified she would not make it home before my dad woke up. She always made it back in time though.

Chris is not the kind of friend you call every night or have lunch with every day. She is like a street cat; she comes and goes as she pleases. She cannot be tied down to a place or a person. Sometimes I will not see Chris for days and then in the middle of the night there will be a knock at my bedroom window, and it will be Chris; crouched in the magnolia tree. I keep my window unlocked for her in case. Chris and Margot cannot stand each other. Chris thinks

Margot is nervous, and Margot thinks Chris is bipolar. She thinks Chris uses me; Chris thinks Margot controls me. They are both a little bit right.

But the important thing; the real thing; is Chris and I understand each other; which I think counts for a lot more than people realize.

Chris calls me on the way over to our house; she says her mom's being a beotch and she is coming over for a couple of hours and do we have any food?

Continued

Chris and I are sharing a bowl of leftover gnocchi in the living room when Margot comes home from dropping Kellie off at her swim team's end-of-season barbecue. 'Oh; hey;' she says. Then she spots Chris's glass of Diet Coke on the coffee table, sans coaster. 'Can you please use a coaster?'

As soon as Margot's up to the stairs; Chris says, 'Gawd! Why is your sister such a botch?'

I slide a coaster under her glass. 'You think everyone's a be-otch today.'

'That's because everyone is.' Chris rolls her eyes toward the ceiling.

Loudly, she says, 'She needs to pull that stick out of her ass.'

From her room Margot yells; 'I heard that!'

'I meant for you too!' Chris yells back; scraping up the last piece of gnocchi for herself.

I sigh. 'She's leaving so soon.'

Snickering; Chris says, 'So is Joshy; like; going to light a candle for her every night until she comes back home?'

I hesitate. While I am not sure if it is still supposed to be a secret; I am sure that Margot would not want Chris knowing any of her business. All I say is 'I'm not sure.'

'Wait a minute. Did she dump him?'

Chris demands.

Reluctantly I nod. 'Don't say anything to her; though;' I warn. 'She's still really sad about it.'

'Margot? Sad?' Chris picks at her nails. 'Margot doesn't have normal human emotions like the rest of us.'

'You just don't know her,' I say.
'Besides; we can't all be like you.'

She grins a toothy grin. She has sharp incisors, which make her look always a little bit hungry. 'True.'

Chris is pure emotion. She screams at the drop of a hat. She says sometimes you must scream out emotions; if you do not; they will fester. The other day she screamed at a

lady at the grocery store for accidentally stepping on her toes. I do not think she is in any danger of her emotions festering.

‘I just can’t believe that in a few days she’ll be gone;’ I say, feeling sniffly suddenly.

‘She’s not dying; Lara Jean. There’s nothing to get all boo-hoo about.’ Chris pulls at a loose string on her red shorts. They are so short that when she is sitting; you can see her underwear, which are red to match her shorts. ‘In fact; this is good for you. It is about time you did your own thing and stopped just

listening to whatever Queen Margot says. This is your junior year; beotch. This is when it is supposed to get good. French some guys; live a little; you know?’

‘I live plenty;’ I say.

‘Yeah; at the nursing home.’ Chris snickers and I glare at her.

Margot started volunteering at the Belleview Retirement Community when she got her driver’s license; it was her job to help host cocktail hour for the residents. I would help sometimes. We had set out peanuts and pour

drinks and sometimes Margot would play the piano, but usually Stormy hogged that. Stormy is the Belleview diva. She rules the roost.

I like listening to her stories. And Miss Mary; she might not be so good at conversation due to her dementia, but she taught me how to knit.

They have a new volunteer there now, but I know that at Belleview it has is the more the merrier, because most of the residents get so few visitors. I should go back soon; I miss going there. And I for sure do not appreciate Chris making fun of it.

‘Those people at Belleview have lived more life than everyone we know combined;’ I tell her. ‘There’s this one lady; Stormy; she was a USO girl! She used to get a hundred letters a day from soldiers who were in love with her. And there was this one veteran who lost his leg; he sent her a diamond ring!’

Chris looks interested suddenly. ‘Did she keep it?’

‘She did;’ I admit. It was wrong of her to keep the ring since she had no intention of marrying him, but she showed it to me, and it was beautiful. It was a pink diamond;

exceedingly rare. I bet it is worth so much money now.

'I guess Stormy sounds kind of like a badass;' Chris says begrudgingly.

'Maybe you could come with me to Belleview sometime;' I suggest. 'We could go to their cocktail hour. Mr. Perelli loves to dance with new girls. He'll teach you how to foxtrot.'

Chris makes a horrible face like I suggested we go hang out at the town dump. 'No; thanks. How about I take you dancing?' She nudges her chin toward upstairs. 'Now

that your sister's left; we can have some real fun. You know I always have fun.'

It is true; Chris does always have fun. Sometimes a little too much fun; but fun, nonetheless.

THE NIGHT BEFORE MARGOT

LEAVE; Sall three of us are in her room helping pack up the last unimportant things. Kellie is organizing Margot's bath stuff, packing it nice and neat in the clear shower caddy. Margot is trying to decide which coat to bring.

'Should I bring my pea-coat and my puffy coat or just my pea-coat?' She asks me.

'Just the pea coat;' I say. 'You can dress that up or down.' I am lying on her bed directing the packing process. 'Kellie; make sure the lotion cap is on tight.'

'It's brand-new- course it's on tight!' Kellie growls, but she double-checks.

'It gets cold in Scotland sooner than it does here;' Margot said, folding the coat and setting it on top of her suitcase. 'I think I'll just bring both.'

'I don't know why you asked if you already knew what you were going to do,' I say.

'Also; I thought you said you were coming home for Christmas. You're still coming home for Christmas; right?'

'Yes; if you'll stop being a brat;' Margot says.

Honestly, Margot is not even packing that much. She does not need a lot. If it were me; I would have packed up my whole room; but not Margot. Her room looks the same; almost.

Margot sits down next to me, and
Kellie climbs up and sits at the foot of the bed.

‘Everything’s changing,’ I say, sighing.

Margot makes a face and puts her
arm around me. ‘Nothing’s changing; not really.

We’re the Song girls forever;
remember?’

Our father stands in the doorway. He
knocks; even though the door is open, and we
can see it is him. ‘I’m going to start packing up
the car now,’ he announces. We watch from the
bed as he lugs one of the suitcases downstairs,

and then he comes up for the other one. Daily he says, 'Oh no; don't get up. Don't trouble yourselves.'

'Don't worry; we won't;' we sing out.

For the past week; our father has been in spring-cleaning mode; even though it is not spring. He is getting rid of everything- the bread machine we never used; CDs; old blankets; our mother's old typewriter. It is all going to Goodwill. A psychiatrist or someone could connect it to Margot's leaving for college, but I cannot explain the exact significance of it. Whatever it

is; it is annoying. I had to shoo him away from my glass- unicorn collection twice.

I lay down my head in Margot's lap.

'So; you are coming home for Christmas; right?'

'Right...'

'I wish I could come with you.' Kellie pouts. 'You're nicer than Lara Jean.'

I give her a pinch. 'See?' she crows.

'Lara Jean will be nice;' Margot says, 'as long as you behave. And you both must take care of Daddy. Make sure he does not work too many Saturdays. Make sure he takes the car in

for inspection next month. And make sure you buy coffee filters; you're always forgetting to buy coffee filters.'

'Yes; drill sergeant;' Kellie and I chorus. I search Margot's face for sadness or fear or worry; for some sign that she is scared to go so far away; that she will miss us as much as we will miss her. I do not see it; though.

The three of us sleep in Margot's room that night.

Kellie falls asleep first; as always. I lie in the dark beside her with my eyes open. I cannot sleep. The thought that tomorrow night Margot will not be in this room- it makes me so sad I can hardly bear it.

I hate to change more than anything.

In the dark next to me, Margot asks; 'Lara Jean - do you think you've ever been in love before? Real love?'

She catches me off guard; I do not have an answer ready for her. I am trying to think of one, but she is already talking again.

wistfully, she says, 'I wish I'd been in love more than once. I think you should fall in love at least twice in high school.' Then she lets out a little sigh and falls asleep. Margot falls asleep like that- one dreamy sigh, and she is off to never-never land: just like that.

I wake up in the middle of the night and Margot's not there. Kellie's curled up on her side next to me, but no Margot. It is pitch-dark- out, only the moonlight filters through the curtains.

I crawl out of bed and move to the window. My breath catches. There they are

Josh and Margot, standing in the driveway.
Margot's face is turned away from him, toward
the moon. Josh is crying. They are not touching.
There is enough space between them for me to
know that Margot has not changed her mind.

I drop the curtain and find my way
back to the bed, where Kellie has rolled farther
into the center. I push her back a few inches so
there will be room for Margot. I wish I had
not seen that. It was too personal. Too real, it
was supposed to be just for them.

If there was a way for me to un-see
it; I would.

I turn on my side and close my eyes.
What must it be like; to have a boy like you so
much he cries for you? And not just any boy.
Josh. Our Josh.

To answer her question- yes; I think
I have been in real love. Just once, though.
With Josh. Our Josh.... Um maybe...

THIS IS HOW MARGOT AND Josh
got together. In a way, I heard about it from
Josh first.

It was two years ago. We were sitting in the library during our free. I was doing the math-

homework: Josh was helping because he is good at math. We had our heads bent over my page; so close I could smell the soap he had used that morning. Irish Spring.

And then he said, 'I need your advice on something. I like someone.'

For a split second, I thought it was me. I thought he was going to say to me. I hoped. It was the start of the school year. We

had spent time together every day that August; sometimes with Margot but mostly just by ourselves because Margot had her internship at the Montpelier plantation three days a week. We swam a lot. I had a great tan from all the swimming. So-o for that split-second I thought he was going to say my name.

But then I saw the way he blushed; the way he looked off into space, and I knew it was not for me.

Mentally, I ran through the list of girls it could be. It was a shortlist. Josh did not hang out with a ton of girls; he had his

best friend Jersey Mike; who had moved from New Jersey in middle school, and his other best friend; Ben, and that was it.

It could have been Ashley; a junior on the volleyball team. He had once pointed her out as the cutest of all the junior girls. In Josh's defense, I had made him do it- I asked him who was the prettiest girl in each grade. For the prettiest first-year student; my grade; he said, Genevieve.

Not that I was surprised; but it still gave me a little pinch in my heart.

It could have been Jodie; the college girl from the bookstore. Josh often talked about how smart Jodie was; how she was so cultured because she had studied abroad in India and was now Buddhist. Ha! I was the one who was half-Korean; I was the one who had taught Josh how to eat with chopsticks. He had had kimchi for the first time at my house.

I was about to ask him who when the librarian came over to shush us, and then we went back to doing work and Josh did not bring it up again and I did not ask.

Honestly, I did not want to know. It was not me, and that was all I cared about.

I did not think for one second that the girl he liked was Margot. Not that I did not see her as a girl who could be liked. She had been asked out before, by a certain type of guy. Smart guys who would partner up with her in chemistry and run against her for student government. In retrospect, it was not so surprising that Josh would like Margot since he is that kind of guy too.

If someone were to ask me what Josh looks like; I would say he is just ordinary.

He looks like the kind of guy you would expect
would be good at computers; the kind of guy
who calls comic books graphic novels. Brown hair.
Not a special brown; only regular brown.

Green eyes that go muddy in the
center. He is on the skinny side, but he is strong.
I know because I sprained my ankle once by the
old baseball field and he piggybacked me all the
way home. He has freckles, which make him look
younger than his age. And a dimple on his left
cheek. I have always liked that dimple. He has
such a serious face otherwise.

What was surprising; what was shocking; was that Margot would like him back. Not because of who Josh was; but because of who Margot was. I had never heard her talk about liking a boy before; not even once. I was the flighty one; the flibbertigibbet as my white grandma would say. Not Margot. Margot was above all that. She existed on some higher plane where those things- boys; makeup; clothes- did not matter.

The way it happened was sudden. Margot came home from school late that day in October; her cheeks were pink from the cold

mountain air, and she had her hair in a braid and a scarf around her neck. She had been working on a project at school; it was dinnertime, and I had cooked chicken parmesan with thin spaghetti in watery tomato sauce.

She came into the kitchen and announced; 'I have something to tell you.'

Her eyes were very bright; I remember she was unspooling the scarf from around her neck.

Kellie was doing her homework at the kitchen table; Daddy was on his way home, and

I was stirring the watery sauce. 'What?' Kellie and I asked.

'Josh likes me.' Margot gave a pleasing kind of shrug; her shoulders nearly went up to her ears.

I went very still. Then I dropped my wooden spoon into the sauce. 'Josh- Josh? Our Josh?' I could not even look at her. I was afraid that she would see.

'Yes. He waited for me after school today; so, he could tell me. He said-'

Margot grinned ruefully. 'He said I'm his dream girl. Can you believe that?'

'Wow;' I said, and I tried to communicate happiness in that word, but I do not know if it came out that way. All I was feeling was despair. And envy. Envy so thick and so black I; felt like I was choking on it. So-o; I tried again; this time with a smile. 'Wow; Margot.'

'Wow;' Kellie echoed. 'So-o; are you; boyfriend and girlfriend; now?'

I held my breath; waiting for her to answer.

Margot took a pinch of parmesan between her fingers and dropped it in her mouth.

'Yeah; I think so.' And then she smiled, and her eyes went all soft and liquid. I understood then that she liked him too. So much.

That night I wrote my letter to Josh.

Dear Josh -

I cried a lot. Just like that, it was over. It was over before I even had a chance. The important thing was not that Josh had chosen Margot. It was that Margot had chosen him.

So, that was that. I cried my eyes out; I wrote my letter; I put the whole thing to rest. I have not thought of him that way since. He and Margot are meant to be.

They are MFEO.

Made for each other.

I am still awake when Margot comes back to bed, but I quickly shut my eyes and pretend to be asleep. Kellie's cuddled up next to me.

I hear a sniffly sound and I peek out of one eye to look at Margot. Her back is to us; her shoulders are shaking. She is crying.

Margot never cries...

Now that I have seen Margot cry over him; I believe it more than ever- they are not over.

THE NEXT DAY: WE DRIVE Margot to the airport. Outside, we load up her suitcases on a luggage carrier- Kellie tries to get on top and dance, but our father pulls her down right away. Margot insists on going in by herself; just like she said she would.

'Margot; at least let me get your bags checked;' Daddy says, trying to maneuver the luggage carrier around her. 'I want to see you go through security.'

'I'll be fine;' she repeats. 'I've flown by myself before. I know how to check a bag.'

She stretches up on her toes and puts her arms around our dad's shoulders.

'I'll call as soon as I get there; I promise.'

'Call every day;' I whisper. The lump in my throat is getting bigger, and a few tears leak out of my eyes. I had hoped I would not cry because I knew Margot would not, and it is lonely to cry alone, but I cannot help it.

'Don't you dare forget us;' Kellie warns.

That makes Margot smile. 'I could never.' She hugs us each one more time.

She saves me for last; the way I knew she would. 'Take diligent care of Daddy and Kellie. You're in charge now.' I do not want to let go; so, I hold on tighter; I am still waiting and hoping for some sign; some indication that she will miss us as much as we will miss her.

And then she laughs, and I release her.

'Bye; Gogo;' I say, wiping my eyes
with a corner of my shirt.

We all watch as she pushes the
luggage carrier over to the check-in counter.

I am crying hard, wiping my tears
with the back of my arm. Daddy puts one arm
around me and one around Kellie. 'We'll wait until
she's in line for security;' he says.

When she has done checking in; she
turns back and looks at us through the glass
doors.

She lifts one hand and waves, and then she heads for the security line. We watch her go; thinking she might turn around one more time, but she does not. She already seems so far away from us. Straight-A Margot; ever capable. When it is my time to leave; I doubt I will be as strong as Margot. But honestly; who is?

I cry all the way home. Kellie tells me I am a bigger baby than she is, but then from the backseat; she grabs my hand and squeezes it, and I know she is sad too.

Even though Margot is not a loud person; it feels quite at home. Empty; somehow. What will it be like when I am gone in two years? What will Daddy and Kellie do then? I hate the thought of the two of them coming home to an empty; ark house with no me and no Margot.

I will not go away far; I will even live at home; at least for the first semester. I think that would be the right thing to do.

LATER THAT AFTERNOON CHRIS CALL'S and tells me to meet her at the mall; she wants my opinion on a leather jacket, and to

get the full effect I must see it in person. I am proud she is asking for my sartorial advice, and it would be good to get out of the house and not be sad anymore, but I am nervous about driving to the mall alone. I (or anyone; really) would consider myself a skittish driver.

I ask her if she will just send me a picture instead, but Chris knows me too well. She says, 'Nuh-uh. You get your ass down here, Lara Jean. You'll never get better at driving if you don't just suck it up and do it.'

So, that is what I am doing- I am driving Margot's car to the mall. I mean; I

have my license and everything; I am just not noticeably confident. My dad has taken me for lessons numerous times; Margot too, and I am fine with them in the car, but I get nervous when I drive alone. It is the part of the changing lane that scares me. I do not like taking my eyes away from what is happening right in front of me; not for a second.

Also, I do not like going too fast.

But the worst thing is I tend to get lost. The only places I can get with absolute certainty are school and the grocery store. I have never had to know how to get to the mall

because Margot always drives us there. But now I must do better; because; I am responsible for driving Kellie around.

Though truthfully, Kellie is better with directions than I am; she knows how to get to a load of places. But I do not want to have to hear her tell me how to get somewhere. I want to feel like the big sister; I want her to relax in the passenger seat; safe in the knowledge that Lara Jean will get her where she needs to go; just like I did with Margot.

Sure; I could just use a GPS, but I would feel silly putting in directions to go to the

mall when I have been there a million times. It should come to me intuitively; easy, where I do not even have to think about it. Instead, I worry about every turn; second-guess every highway sign; is it north or is it south; do I turn right here, or is it the next one? I have never had to pay attention to it.

But today; so far so good. I am listening to the radio; bopping along; even driving with just one hand on the wheel. I do this to feign confidence because the more I fake it; the more it is supposed to feel true.

Everything is going so well that I take the shortcut way instead of the highway way. I cut through the side neighborhood, and even as I am doing it; I am wondering if this was such a great idea. After a couple of minutes, things are not looking so familiar, and I realize; I should have taken a left instead of a right. I push down the panic that is rising in my chest and I try to backtrack.

You can do it; you can do it.

There is a four-way stop sign. I do not see anyone; so, I zip ahead. I do not even

see the car on my right; I feel it before I see it.

I scream my head off. I taste copper in my mouth. Am I bleeding? Did I bite my tongue; off? I touch it and it is still there. My heart is racing; my whole body feels wet and clammy.

I try to take deep breaths, but I cannot seem to get air.

My legs shake as I get out of the car. The other guy is already out; inspecting his car with his arms crossed. He is old; older than my

dad, and he has gray hair, and he is wearing shorts with red lobsters on them. His car is fine; mine has a huge dent in the side. 'Didn't you see the stop sign?' He demands... 'Where you are texting on your phone?'

I shake my head; my throat is closing. I just do not want to cry. If I do not cry. He senses this. The irritated furrow of his brow is loosening. 'Well; my car looks fine;' he says reluctantly. 'Are you; all right?'

Part- 5

I nod again. 'I'm so sorry;' I say.

'Kids need to be more careful;' the man says as if I have not spoken.

The lump in my throat is getting bigger. 'I'm very; deeply sorry; sir.'

He makes a grunting sound. 'You should call someone to get you;' the man says.

'Do you want me to wait?'

'No; thank you.' What if he is a serial killer or a child molester? I do not want to be alone with a strange man. The man drives off.

As soon as he is gone; it occurs to me that I should have called the police while he

was still here. Aren't you always supposed to call the police when you are in a car accident; no matter what? I am sure they told us that in driver's ed. So that is another mistake I made.

I sit down on the curb and stare at Margot's car. I have only had it for two hours and I have already wrecked it. I rest my head in my lap and sit in a tight bundle. My neck is starting to ache. This is when the tears start. My dad is not going to be happy.

Margot is not going to be happy. They will both agree that I have no business driving around town unsupervised, and they are

right. Driving a car is a lot of responsibility.

Maybe

I am not ready for it yet...

I will never be ready. Even when I am old; my sisters or my dad will have to drive me around because that is how useless I am.

I pull out my phone and call Josh.

When he answers, I say, 'Josh; can you do me an f-f-favor?' and my voice comes out so wobbly I am embarrassed.

which of course he hears because he's
Josh. He comes to attention immediately and
says, 'What's wrong?'

'I just got into a car accident. I do
not even know where I am. Can you come to get
me?'

Wobble - Wobble.

'Are you hurt?' He demands...

'No; I'm fine. I'm just- 'If I say
another word; I will cry.

'What street signs do you see? What
stores?'

I crane my neck to look. 'Obsession;' I say. I look for the closest mailbox.

'I'm at 9810 Obsession Road.'

'I'm on my way. Do you want me to stay on the phone with you?'

'No; that's okay.' I hang up and start to cry.

I do not know how long I have been sitting there crying when another car rolls up in front of me. I look up, and it is Marcel Kavinsky's black Audi with the tinted windows.

One of them rolls down. 'Lara Jean? Are you okay?'

I nod my head yes and make a motion as he should just go. He rolls the window back up, and he is going to drive off; but then he pulls over to the side and parks.

He climbs out and starts inspecting my car. 'You messed it up;' he says. 'Did you get the other guy's insurance info?'

'No; his car was fine.' Furtively, I wipe my cheeks with my arm. 'It was my fault.'

'Do you have Triple A?' I nod.

'So; you called them already?'

'No. But someone's coming.'

Marcel sits down next to me. 'How long have you been sitting here crying by yourself?'

I turn my head and wipe my face again. 'I'm not crying.'

Marcel Kavinsky and I used to be friends; back before he was Kavinsky when he was Marcel K. There was a whole gang of us in middle school. The boys were Marcel Kavinsky and John Ambrose McClaren and Trevor Pike.

The girls were Genevieve and me and Allie Feldman who lived down the block and sometimes Chris. Growing up.

Genevieve lived two streets away from me. It is funny how much childhood is about proximity. Like whom your best friend is directly correlated to how close your houses are, whom you sit next to in music is all about how close your names are in the alphabet. Such a game of chance.

In eighth grade- Genevieve moved to a different neighborhood, and we stayed friends a little while longer. She had come back to the

neighborhood to hang out, but something was different. By high school- Genevieve had eclipsed us. She was still friends with the boys, but the girls' crew was over. Allie and I stayed friends until she moved last year, but there was always something just a little bit humiliating about it like we were two leftover heels of bread and together we made a dry sandwich.

We are not friends anymore. Me and Genevieve or me and Marcel. Therefore, it is so weird to be sitting next to him on somebody's curb as no time has passed.

His phone buzzes and he takes it out of his pocket. 'I've got to go.'

I sniffle. 'Where are you headed?'

'To Gen's.'

'You'd better get going then,' I say.
'Genevieve will be mad if you're late.'

Marcel makes a piffle sound, but he sure does get up fast. I wonder what it is like to have that much power over a boy. I do not think I would want it; it is a lot of responsibility to hold a person's heart in your hands. He is getting into his car when; as an

afterthought; he turns around and asks; 'Want me to call Triple-A for you?'

'No; that's okay;' I say. 'Thanks for stopping; though. That was nice of you.'

Marcel grins. I remember that about Marcel- how much he likes positive reinforcement.

'Do you feel better now?'

I nod. I do.

'Good;' he says.

He has the look of a Handsome Boy
from a different time. He could be a dashing
World War I soldier; handsome enough for a girl
to wait years for him to come back from the
war; so handsome she could wait forever. He
could be wearing a red letterman's jacket;
driving around in a Corvette with the top down;
one arm on the steering wheel; on his way to
pick up his girl for the sock hop. Marcel's
wholesome good looks feel more like yesterday
than today. There is just something about him
girls like.

He was my first kiss. It is so strange to think of it now. It feels like forever ago, but it was just four years.

Josh shows up around a minute later as I am texting Chris that I am not going to make it to the mall. I stand up. 'It took you long enough!'

'You told me in 9810. This is 8901!'

Confidently I say, 'No; I said 8901.'

'No; you said 9810. And why weren't you answering your phone?' Josh gets out of his

car, and when he sees the side of my car, his jaw drops.

'Holy crap... Did you call Triple A yet?'

'No... can you?'

Josh does, and then we sit in his car in the air-conditioning while we wait. I almost get into the backseat when I remember. Margot is not here anymore. I have ridden in his car so many times, and I do not think I have ever once sat up front in the passenger seat.

'Um - you know Margot's going to kill you; right?'

I whip my head around so fast my hair slaps me in the face. 'Margot's not going to find out; so, don't you say a word!'

'When would I even talk to her? We're broken up; remember?'

I frown at him...

'I hate when people do that- when you ask them to keep something a secret and instead of saying yes or no; they say, 'Whom would I tell?'

'I didn't say, 'Whom would I tell?'

'Just say yes or no and mean it. Don't make it conditional.'

'I won't tell Margot anything;' he says. 'It'll just be between you and me. I promise... all right?'

'All right;' I say. And then it gets quiet with neither of us saying anything; there is just the sound of cool air coming out of the A/C vents.

My stomach feels queasy thinking about how I am going to tell my dad.

I should break the news to him with tears in my eyes; so, he feels sorry for me. Or I could say something like; I have good news and unwelcome news. The good news is I am fine; not a scratch on me. The unwelcome news is the car is wrecked. 'wrecked' is not the right word.

I am mulling over the right word choice in my head when Josh says, 'So just because; Margot and I broke up; you're not going to talk to me anymore either?' Josh sounds jokingly bitter or bitterly joking if there is such a combination.

I look over at him in surprise. 'Don't be dumb. Of course, I am still going to talk to you.

Just not in public.' This is the role I play with him. The part of the annoying little sister. As if I am the same as Kellie. As if we are not only a year apart. Josh does not crack a smile; he just looks glum; so, I bump my forehead against his. 'That was a joke; dummy!'

'Did she tell you she was going to do it? I mean; was it always her plan?'

When I hesitate; he says, 'Come on. I know she tells you everything.'

'Not really. Not this time anyway. Honestly, Josh. I did not know a thing about it. Promise.' I cross my heart.

Josh absorbs this. Chewing on his bottom lip he says, 'Maybe she'll change her mind. That's possible; right?'

I do not know if it is more heartless for me to say yes or no because he will be hurt either way. Because while I am 99.9 percent sure that she will get back together with him;

there is that tiny chance she will not, and I do not want to get his hopes up. So-o I do not say anything.

He swallows; his Adam's apple bobbing up and down. 'No; you're right.

When Margot makes up her mind; she doesn't go back on it.'

Please, please; please; do not cry.

I rest my head on his shoulder and say, 'You never know; Joshy.'

Josh stares straight ahead. A squirrel is darting up the big oak tree in the

yard. Up and down and back up again. We both watch. 'What time does she land?'

'Not for hours...'

'Is - is she coming home for Thanksgiving?'

'No. They don't get off for Thanksgiving. It is Scotland; Josh. They don't celebrate American holidays; hello!' I am teasing again, but my heart's not in it.

'That's right;' he says.

I say, 'She'll be home for Christmas; though;' and we both sigh.

'Can I still spend time together with you guys?' Josh asks me.

'Me and Kellie?'

'Your dad; too.'

'We're not going anywhere;' I assure him.

Josh looks relieved. 'Good. I'd hate to lose you; too.'

As soon as he says it; my heart does this pause, and I forget to breathe, and just for that one second; I am dizzy. And then; just as quickly as it came; the feeling; the strange

flutter in my chest; is gone, and the tow truck arrives.

When we pull into my driveway; he says, 'Do you want me to be there when you tell your dad?'

I brighten up and then I remember how Margot said I am in charge now. I am sure taking responsibility for one's mistakes is part of being in charge.

DADDY ISN'T SO MAD After all. I go through my whole good news-bad news story,

and he just sighs and says, 'As long as you're all right.'

The car needs a special part that must be flown in from Indiana or Idaho; I cannot remember which. In the meantime, I will have to share the car with Daddy and take the bus to school or ask Josh for rides, which was already my plan.

Margot calls later that night. Kellie and I are watching TV and I scream for Daddy to come quick. We sit on the couch and pass the phone around and take turns talking to her.

'Margot; guess what happened today!' Kellie shouts.

Frantically, I shake my head at her. Do not tell her about the car; I mouth. I give her warning eyes.

'Lara Jean got into -' Kellie pauses tantalizingly. 'A fight with Daddy.

Yes, she was mean to me, and Daddy told her to be nice; so, they fought.'

I grab the phone out of her hand. 'We didn't fight; Go-go. Kellie's just being annoying.'

'What did you guys have for dinner?

Did you cook the chicken I defrosted last night?'

Margot asks. Her voice sounds so far away.

I push the volume up on the phone.

'Yes; but never mind about that. Are you settled in your room? Is it big? What's your roommate like?'

'She's nice. She is from London, and she has a fancy accent. Her name is Penelope St. George-Dixon.'

'Gosh; even her name sounds fancy;' I say. 'What about your room?'

'The room is about the same as that dorm we saw at UVA; it's just older.'

'What time is it over there?'

'It's almost midnight. We're five hours ahead; remember?'

We are five hours ahead like she is already considering Scotland her home, and she has only been gone a day; not even! 'We miss you already;' I tell her.

'Miss; you too.'

After dinner, I text Chris to see if she wants to come over, but she does not text back.

She is out with one of the guys she hooks up with. Which is fine. I should catch up on my scrapbooking.

I was hoping to be done with Margot's scrapbook before she left for college, but as anyone who is ever scrapbooked knows; Rome was not built in a day. You could spend a year or more working on one scrapbook.

I have Motown girl-group music playing, and my supplies are laid out all around me in a semicircle. My heart hole punch; pages, and pages of scrapbook paper; pictures I have cut out of magazines; glue gun; my tape dispenser with all my different colored washi tapes.

Souvenirs like the playbill from when we saw Wicked in New York; receipts; pictures.

Ribbon; buttons; stickers; charms. A good scrapbook has texture. It is thick and chunky and does not close all the way.

I am working on a Josh-and-Margot page. I do not care what Margot says.

They are getting back together; I know it. And even if they are not right away; it is not like Margot can just erase him from her history. He was such a big part of her senior year.

And like, her life. The only compromise I am willing to make is I was saving my heart washi tape for this page, but I can just do a regular plaid tape instead. But then I put the plaid tape up against the pictures and the colors do not look as good.

So, I go ahead and use the heat tape.
And then; swaying to the music; I use my heart
template to cut out a picture of the two of
them at prom. Margot's going to love this.

I am carefully gluing a dried rose
petal from Margot's corsage when my dad raps
on the door. 'What are you up to tonight?' he
asks me.

'This;' I say, gluing another petal. 'If
I keep at it; it'll probably be done by
Christmas.'

'Ah.' My dad does not move. He just hovers there in the doorway; watching me work.

'Well; I'm going to watch that new Ken Burns documentary in a bit; if you want to join me.'

'Maybe;' I say, just to be nice. It will be too much of a pain to bring all my supplies downstairs and get set up again. I am in a good rhythm right now. 'Why don't you get it started without me?'

'All right. I'll leave you to it; then.'

Daddy shuffles down the stairs.

It takes me most of the night, but I finish the Josh-and-Margot page, and it comes out nice. Next is a sister page. For this one, I use flowered paper for the background, and I glue in a picture of the three of us from a long time ago. Mommy took it. We are standing in front of the oak tree in front of our house in our church clothes.

We are all wearing white dresses, and we have matching pink ribbons on our hair. The best thing about the picture is Margot and I are smiling sweetly, and Kellie is picking her nose.

I smile to myself. Kellie's going to pitch a fit when she sees this page. I cannot wait.

MARGOT SAYS THAT JUNIOR

Years the most important year; the busiest year; a year so crucial that everything else in life hinges upon it. So, I figure I should get in all the pleasure reading I can before school starts next week and junior year officially begins. I'm sitting on my front steps; reading a 1980's romantic British spy novel I got for seventy-five cents at the Friends of the Library sale.

I am just getting to the good stuff
(Cressida must seduce Nigel to gain access to
the spy codes!) when Josh walks out of his
house to get the mail. He sees me too; he lifts
his hand like he is just going to wave and not
come over; but then he does.

'Hey; nice onesie;' he says as he makes
his way across the driveway.

It is faded light blue with sunflowers,
and it ties around the neck. I got it from the
vintage store; 75 percent off. And it is not a
onesie. 'This is a sunsuit;' I tell- him; going back
to my book. I try to subtly hide the cover with

my hand. The last thing I need is Josh giving me a challenging time for reading a trashy book when I am just trying to enjoy a relaxing afternoon.

I can feel him looking at me; his arms crossed; waiting. I look up. 'What?'

'Want to see a movie tonight at the Bess? There is a Pixar movie playing. We can take Kellie.'

'Sure; texts me when you want to head over;' I say, turning the page of my book. Nigel is unbuttoning Cressida's blouse and she is

wondering when the sleeping pill she slipped in his Merlot will kick in; while simultaneously hoping it will not kick in too soon because Nigel is quite a good kisser.

Josh reaches down and tries to get a closer look at my book. I slap his hand away, but not before he reads aloud; 'Cressida's heart raced as Nigel moved his hand along her stockinged thigh.' Josh cracks up. 'What the heck are you reading?'

My cheeks are burning. 'Oh; be quiet.'

Chuckling; Josh backs away. 'I'll leave you to Cressida and Noel then.'

To his back, I call out; 'For your information; it's Nigell!'

Kellie's over the moon about hanging out with Josh. When Josh asks the girl at the concession stand to layer the butter on the popcorn (bottom; middle; top); we both give an approving nod. Kellie sits in the middle of us, and at the funny parts; she laughs so hard she kicks her legs up in the air. She weighs so little that the seat keeps tipping up. Josh and I share smiles over her head.

Whenever Josh; Margot, and I went to the movies; Margot always sat in the middle too. It was so she could whisper to both of us. She never wanted me to feel left out because she had a boyfriend, and I did not. She was so careful about this that it made me worry at first; that she sensed something from before. But she is not someone to hold back or up the truth. She is just a good big sister.

The best...

There were times; that I felt left out anyway. Not in a romantic way; but a friend way. Josh and I had always been friends. But

those times when he had put his arm around Margot when we were in line for popcorn; or in the car when they would talk softly to each other, and I felt like the kid in the backseat who cannot hear what the adults are talking about; it made me feel a little bit invisible. They made me wish I had someone to whisper to in the backseat.

It is strange to be the one in the front seat now. The view is not so different from the backseat. Everything feels good and normal and the same, which is comfort.

Chris calls me later that night while I am painting my toenails in different colored pinks. It is so loud in the background she must yell. 'Guess what!'

'What? I can barely hear you!' I am doing my pinky toe a fruit-punch color called Hit Me with Your Best Shot.

'Hold up.' I can hear Chris moving rooms because it gets quieter. 'Can you hear me now?'

'Yes; much better.'

'Guess who broke up.'

I have moved on to a mod pink color that looks like white-Out with a drop of red in it.

'Who?'

'Gen and Kavinsky! She dumped his ass.'

My eyes got huge. 'Whoa! Why?'

'Apparently; she met some UVA guy at that hostessing job she had. I guarantee you.

she was cheating on Kavinsky the whole summer.' A guy calls Chris's name, and

Chris says; 'I got to go. It's my turn at bocce.'

Chris hangs up without saying goodbye, which is her way.

I met Chris through Genevieve. They are cousins- their moms are sisters. Chris used to come over sometimes when we were little, but she and Gen did not get along even back then. They would argue over whose Barbie had dibs on Ken because there was only one Ken. I did not even try to fight for Ken; even though he was technically mine.

Well; Margot's. At school, some people do not even know Gen and Chris are cousins.

They do not look alike; like at all Gen is petite with fit arms and sunny blond hair the color of margarine. Chris is blond too, but a peroxide blond-haired person and she is taller and has a broad swimmer's shoulders. Still, there is a sameness to them. Chris was wild in our Shaddyman year. She went to every party; got drunk; hooked up with older boys. That year a junior guy from the lacrosse team told everyone that Chris had sex with him in the boys' locker room, and it was not even true.

Genevieve made Marcel threaten to kick his ass if he did not tell everybody the

truth. I thought it was a cordial thing Genevieve did for Chris, but Chris insisted that Gen had only done it; so, people would not think she was related to a slut. After that Chris stopped hanging out and did her own thing, with people from another school. She still has that freshman-year reputation though. She acts like she does not care; but I know she does; at least a little.

ON SUNDAY, DADDY MAKES-

lasagna. And he does- that thing where he puts black-bean salsa in it to jazz it up, and it sounds gross, but it is good, and you do not

notice the beans. Josh comes over too, and he has three helpings, which Daddy loves. When Margot's name comes up over dinner; I look over at Josh and see how stiff he gets, and I feel sorry for him. Kellie must notice too because she changes the subject over to dessert, which is a batch of peanut-butter brownies I baked earlier in the afternoon. Since Daddy cooked; our kids have kitchen duty. He uses every pot in the kitchen when he makes lasagna; so, it is the worst cleanup; but worth it.

After the three of us are relaxing in the TV room. It is Sunday night, but there is

not that Sunday night feeling in the air because tomorrow is Labor Day, and we have one last day before school starts. Kellie's working on her dog collage; Quelle surprise.

'What kind do you want most of all?'

Josh asks her.

Kellie answers back lightning fast. 'An Akita.'

'Child?'

Again, her answer is prompt. 'Boy.'

'What'll you name him?'

Kellie hesitates, and I know why. I roll over and tickle Kellie's barefoot. 'I know what you'll name him;' I say in a singsong voice.

'Be quiet; Lara Jean!' she screeches.

I have Josh's full attention now.

'Come on; tell us;' Josh begs.

I look at Kellie and she is giving me evil glowing red eyes. 'Never mind;' I say, feeling nervous suddenly. Kellie might be the baby of the family, but she is not someone to trifle with.

Then Josh tugs on my ponytail and says, 'Aw; come on; Lara Jean! Don't leave us in suspense.'

I prop myself up on my elbows, and Kellie tries to put her hand over my mouth.

Giggling; I say, 'It's after a boy she likes.'

'Shut up; Lara Jean; shut up!'

Kellie kicks me, and in doing so she accidentally rips one of her dog pictures.

She lets out a cry and drops to her knees and examines it. Her face is red with the

effort of not crying. I feel like such a jerk. I sit up and try to give her and I am a sorry hug, but she twists away from me and kicks at my legs; so hard I yelped. I pick the picture up and try to tape it back, but before I can; Kellie snatches it out of my hands and gives it to Josh. 'Josh; fix it;' she says. 'Lara Jean ruined it.' 'Kellie; I was only teasing;' I say lamely. I was not going to say the name of the boy. I would never have said it.

She ignores me, and Josh smooths the paperback out with a coaster, and with the concentration of a surgeon; he tapes the

two pieces together. He wipes his brow. 'Phew.
I think this one will make it.'

I clap, and I try to catch Kellie's eye,
but she will not look at me. I know I deserve it.
The boy Kellie has a crush on- it is Josh.

Kellie whisks her college away from
Josh. Stiffly she says, 'I'm going upstairs to
work on this. Good night; Josh.'

'Night; Kellie;' Josh says.

Meekly, I say, 'Good night; Kellie;' but
she is already running up the stairs, and she
does not reply.

When we hear her bedroom door closing; Josh turns to me and says, 'You're in so much trouble.'

'I know;' I say. I have a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach. Why did I do that?

Even as I was doing it; I knew it was wrong. Margot would never have done that to me.

That is not how big sisters are supposed to treat their little sisters; especially not when I am so much older than Kellie.

'Who's this kid she likes?'

'Just a boy from school.'

Josh sighs. 'Is she old enough to have crushes on boys? I feel like she's too young for all that.'

'I had crushes on boys when I was nine,' I tell him. I am still thinking about Kellie. I wonder how I can make it; so, she is not mad at me anymore. Somehow, I do not think snickerdoodles will cut it this time.

'Who?' Josh asks me.

'Who what?' Maybe if I can somehow convince Daddy to buy her a puppy.

'Who was your first crush?'

'Hmm. My first real crush?' I had kindergarten and first- and second-grade crushes aplenty, but they do not count. 'Like the first one that mattered?'

'Sure.'

'Well - I guess Marcel Kavinsky.'

Josh practically gags. 'Kavinsky? Are you kidding me? He is so obvious. I thought you would be into someone more - I do not know; subtle. Marcel Kavinsky's such a cliché. He's like

a cardboard cutout of a 'cool guy,' in a movie about high school.'

I shrug. 'You asked.'

'Wow;' he says, shaking his head.

'Just - wow.'

'He used to be different. I mean; he was still very Marcel; but less so.'

When Josh looks unconvinced; I say,
'You're a boy; so, you can't understand what I'm talking about.'

'You're right. I don't understand!'

'Hey; you're the one who had a crush
on Ms. Rossinchild!'

Josh turns red. 'She was pretty back
then!'

'Uh-huh.' I give him a knowing look.
'She was really 'pretty.' 'Our across-the-street
neighbor Ms. Rossinchild used to mow her lawn
in terry-cloth short shorts and a string bikini
top. The neighborhood boys would conveniently
play in Josh's yard on those days.

'Anyway; Ms. Rossinchild wasn't my
first crush.'

'She wasn't?'

'No... you were.'

It takes me a few seconds to process this. Even then, all I can manage is 'Huh?'

'When I first moved here; before I knew your true personality.' I kick him in the shin for that, and he yelps. 'I was twelve and you were eleven. I let you ride my scooter; remember? That scooter was my pride and joy. I saved up for it for two birthdays. And I let you take it for a ride.'

'I thought you were just being generous.'

'You crashed it and you got a big scratch on the side;' he continues.

Continued- 1

'Remember that?'

'Yeah; I remember you cried.'

'I didn't cry. I was justifiably upset. And that was the end of my little crush.' Josh gets up to go and we walk to the foyer.

Before he opens the front door; Josh
turns around and says to me; 'I don't know
what I would've done if you hadn't been around
after - Margot dumped me.' A blush blooms pink
across his face; underneath each sweetly
freckled cheek. 'You're keeping me going; Lara
Jean.' Josh looks at me and I feel it all; every
memory; every moment we have ever shared.
Then he gives me a quick; fierce hug and
disappears into the night.

I am standing there in the open door
and the thought flies in my head; so quick; so
unexpected; I cannot stop myself from thinking

it- If you were mine; I would never have broken up with you; not in a million years.

THIS IS HOW WE MET josh. We were having a teddy-bear; tea-party picnic on the back lawn with real tea and muffins. It had to be in the backyard; so, no one would see. I was eleven; way too old for it, and Margot was thirteen; way; way too old. I got the idea in my head because- I read about it in a book. Because of Kellie, I could pretend it was for her and persuade Margot into playing with us. Mommy had died the year before and ever since

Margot rarely said no to anything if it was for Kellie.

We had everything spread out on Margot's old baby blanket, which was blue and nubby with a squirrel print. I laid out a chipped tea set of Margot's; mini muffins studded with blueberries and granules of sugar that I made Daddy buy at the grocery store and a teddy bear for each of us. We were all wearing hats because I insisted.

'You have to wear a hat to a tea party;' I kept saying until Margot finally put hers on just so; I would stop. She had on

Mommy's straw gardening hat, and Kellie was wearing a tennis visor, and I had fancied up an old fur hat of Grandma's by pinning a few plastic flowers on top. I was pouring lukewarm tea out of the thermos and into cups when Josh climbed up on the fence and watched us. The month before; from the upstairs playroom; we had watched Josh's family moved in. We had hoped for girls, but then we saw the movers unload a boy bike and we went back to playing.

Josh sat up on the fence; not saying anything, and Margot was stiff and embarrassed; her cheeks were red, but she

kept her hat on. Kellie was the one to call out to him. 'Hello; boy;' she said.

'Hi;' he said. His hair was shaggy, and he kept shaking it out of his eyes. He was wearing a red T-shirt with a hole in the shoulder.

Kellie asked him; 'What's your name?'

'Josh.'

'You should play with us; Josh;' Kellie commanded.

So- he did.

I did not know then; how important this boy would become to me and the people I love the most. But even if I had known; what could I have done differently?

It was never going to be me and him.
Even though.

I THOUGHT I WAS OVER him.

When I wrote my letter; when I said my goodbyes; I meant it; I swear I did.

It was not even that hard; not really.
Not when I thought about how much Margot liked him; how much she cared. How could I

begrudge Margot a first love? Margot: who had sacrificed so much for all of us. She always; always put Kellie and me before herself.

Letting go of Josh was my way of putting Margot first.

But now; sitting here alone in my living room; with my sister four thousand miles away and Josh next door; all I can think is Josh Sanderson; I liked you first. By all rights, you were mine. And if it had been me; I would have packed you in my suitcase and taken you with me, or you know what; I would have stayed. I would have never left you.

Not in a million years; not for anything.

Thinking these kinds of thoughts;
feeling these kinds of feelings; is more than
disloyal. I know that. It is downright
traitorous. It makes my soul feel dirty.

Margot's been gone less than a week
and look at me; how fast I cave. How fast I
covet. I am a betrayer of the worst kind;
because I am betraying my sister, and there is
no greater betrayal than that. But what now?
What am I supposed to do with all these
feelings?

I suppose there is only one thing I
can do. I will write him another letter. A
postscript with as many pages as it takes to X
away whatever feelings I have left for him.

I will put this whole thing to rest,
for the last time.

I go to my room, and I find my special
writing pen; the one with the smooth inky black
ink. I take out my heavy writing paper, and I
begin to write. P.S. I still love you.

I still love you and that is a huge
problem for me, and it is also a huge surprise. I

swear I did not know. All this time; I thought I was over it. How could I not be when it is Margot you love? It has always been Margot- - when I am done; I placed the message in my diary alternatively of in my hatbox. I have a feeling I am not done-done yet; that there is still further I need to tell; I just have not thought of it, nevertheless.

KELLIE'S STILL MAD AT ME- In the wake of the Josh revelation; I had forgotten all about Kellie. She neglects me all daybreak, and when I ask if she wants me to take her to the store for class accumulations;

she looks; 'With what car? You destroyed Margot's.'

Oops! 'I was going to take Daddy's when he comes back from Home Depot.' I back away from her; far enough away that she cannot lash out at me with a kick or a hit.

'There's no need to be sarcastic; Katherine.'

Kellie practically growls, which is exactly the reaction I was hoping for. I hate when Kellie goes mad and silent. But then she

flounces away, and with her back to me; she says; 'I'm not conversing with you.

You know what you did; consequently, don't bother attempting to get back on my good side.'

I follow her around; trying to provoke her into talking to me, but there is no use. I have stayed cleared.

So, I give up and go back to my room and put on the Mermaids soundtrack. I am planning my first-week back-to-school outlay on my bed when I get a text from Josh. A little

excitement runs up my spine to see his name on my phone, but I sternly remind myself of my pledge. He is still Margot's; not yours. It prepares things that they are broken up. He was hers first, which means he is hers always. Want to go for a bike ride on that trail by the park?

Biking is a Margot-type activity. She loves going on trails, hikes, and bikes. Negative with me.

Josh knows it too. I do not even own my bike anymore, and Margot's is too big for me.

Kellie's is more my size.

I write back that I cannot; I must help my dad around the house. It is not a total lie.

My dad did ask me to help him report some of his plants. And I said only if he was making me and if I had no say in the matter; then sure.

What does he need help with?

What to say? I must be careful about my excuses; Josh can easily look out the

window and see if I am home or not. I text
back a vague Just some random chores.

Knowing Josh; he would show up with
a shovel or a rake or whatever tool the chore
entailed. And then he would stay for dinner
because he always stays for dinner.

He said I was keeping him going. Me;
Lara Jean. I want to be that person for him; I
want to be the one who keeps him going during
this challenging time. I want to be his
lighthouse keeper while we wait for Margot's
return. But it is hard. It was harder than I
thought.

I WAKE UP HAPPY BECAUSE it is the first day of school. I have always loved the first day of school better than the last day of school. Firsts are best because they are beginnings.

While Daddy and Kellie are upstairs washing up; I make whole-wheat pancakes with sliced bananas; Kellie's favorite. First-day-of-school breakfast was always an important thing with my mom, and then Margot took over, and now I guess- it is my turn. The pancakes are a little dense, not as light, and fluffy as Margot's. And the coffee - well; is coffee

supposed to be light brown like cocoa? When Daddy comes down; he says in a merry voice; 'I smell coffee!' And then he drinks it and gives me a thumbs-up, but I notice he only has one sip. I am a better baker than I am a cook.

'You look like a farm girl;' Kellie says with a touch of meanness, and I know she is still at least a little bit mad at me. 'Thank you;' I say. I am wearing faded short-tails and a scoop-neck floral shirt. It does look farm-girlish, but I think pleasantly. Margot left her brown lace-up combat boots, and they are only a half size too big. With thick socks, they are a

perfect fit. 'Will you braid my hair to the side?'

I ask her. 'You don't deserve a braid from me;'

Kellie says, licking her fork. 'Besides; a braid

would take it too far.'

Kellie is only nine, but she has good
fashion sense.

'Agreed;' my dad says, not looking up
from his paper.

I put my plate in the sink and then
put Kellie's bag lunch down next to her plate. It
has all her favorite things- a Brie sandwich;

barbecue chips; rainbow cookies; a good kind of apple juice.

‘Have a great first day;’ my sad chirps. He pops out his cheek for a kiss, and I bend down and give him one. I try to give Kellie one too, but she turns her cheek.

‘I got your favorite kind of apple juice and your favorite kind of Brie;’ I tell her pleadingly. I do not want us to start the school year off on a bad note.

‘Thank you;’ she sniffles with a tissue.

Before she can stop me; I throw my arms around her and squeeze her so tight she yelps. Then I get my new floral back-to-school book bag and head out the front door. It is a new day, a new year. I have a feeling it is going to be a good one.

Josh is already in the car, and I run over and open the door and slide inside with him.

'You're on time;' Josh says. He lifts his hand for a hand bump, and when I slap his knuckles; our hands make a soft smack. 'That was a good one;' he says.

'An eight at least;' I agree. We
zipped past the pool; the sign for our
neighborhood; then past Wendy's.

'Do you think, Kellie, forgiven you yet
for the other night?'

'Not quite; but hopefully soon.'

'Nobody can hold a grudge like Kellie;'
Josh says, and I nod wholeheartedly. I can
never stay mad for long, but Kellie will nurse a
hatred as her life depended on this. 'I made her
a good first-day-of-school lunch; so, that'll help;'
I say. 'You're a good elder sibling.'

I pipe up with 'As good as Margot?'

Furthermore, collectively we chorus; 'Nobody's
as immeasurable as Margot.'